

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks Following a Meeting With President Michel Sleiman of Lebanon and an Exchange With Reporters

December 14, 2009

President Obama. Thank you very much, everybody. I want to welcome President Sleiman and his delegation for the excellent visit that we've had.

I thought that this meeting was critical because the relationship between the United States and Lebanon is critical. We have a strong friendship between the two countries. Part of that results from the fact that we have 2 million Lebanese Americans who have made extraordinary contributions to the life of the United States and continue to do so. Obviously, Lebanon is a critical country in a critical region, and we want to do everything that we can to encourage a strong, independent, and democratic Lebanon.

The President has, I think, done extraordinary work in managing what is a difficult situation. And we have continued to see progress in dealing with a lot of the crosscurrents that exist not only in Lebanon but also in the region as a whole.

The United States wants to be a partner in this process. We want to strengthen Lebanese Armed Forces so that they can help to secure the sovereignty and territory of Lebanon. We want to make sure that there's full implementation of United States—United Nations resolutions that help keep the peace in the region and ensure Lebanon's stability.

We both agree that the issues of Middle East peace are linked to the issues that exist inside Lebanon, and so that the more we can work together to encourage the parties involved—not only Israel and the Palestinians but also the Israelis and the Syrians, for example—to have constructive dialog and try to negotiate out of the current impasse, the better off Lebanon will be, the better off the world will be.

We also want to make sure that the United States assistance to Lebanon is not seen just through a security lens. As I indicated in my speech in Oslo last week, part of peace is economic opportunity and justice in civil society. And so to the extent that we can help provide support around issues like education that promote opportunity within Lebanon, we want to do so.

Let me just close by saying here in the South Lawn, there is actually a Lebanese cedar tree that was planted 30 years ago, a testimony to difficult times for both the United States and Lebanon, but also the fact that we remain hopeful about the future. That tree is strong; it is thriving. I think it represents the friendship between the United States and Lebanon. And we will continue to water that tree just as we continue to nurture the relationship between our two countries.

And I don't know if you want to do a quick translation. I apologize; I should have stopped in between my comments.

Interpreter. Yes, Mr. President. Thank you, sir.

[At this point, President Obama's remarks were translated.]

President Obama. Shukran.

President Sleiman. Thank you very much. I am pleased—I had the pleasure today to come here in response to the invitation of his President—of President Obama to the United States, and I had the pleasure to meet President Obama and high officials in the United States administration.

We have with President Obama a common policy of openness and dialog. And we believe that the election of President Obama was a great mark in history, especially his speech in Cairo, which gave hope to find peaceful solutions to controversial issues. In addition to that, President Obama gaining of Nobel Peace Prize also gave hope to people across the world, and especially the people of the Arab countries, to find a peaceful solution that would return the rights of the people of Palestine, and that would ensure withdrawal and grant Palestinian refugees the right of return.

We have asserted our attachment and our support to the Arab Peace Initiative, which was stated in 2002 in Beirut and which was affirmed in the Doha summit, which grants all the rights back to their owners. We have also discussed the situation in Lebanon, which had witnessed great stability last year and this year, be it on the political, security, and economic levels.

We also discussed the Israeli threats against Lebanon that are taking place and that place obstacles to the economic growth of the country. We asked President Obama and the United States to exert further pressure on Israel to implement Resolution 1701 and to withdraw from Israeli—Lebanese—sorry—occupied territories, namely from the village of Ghajar, Kfar Shouba Hills, and the Shebaa Farms.

We also talked about the bilateral relations between Lebanon and the United Nations. We believe we have many common denominators with the United States. The first one are Americans of Lebanese descent which play a great role in the United States and also the shared value that we have with the United States and its people, namely the value of democracy, respect of the human rights, public freedoms, rejection of extremism and fundamentalism, and confronting terrorism.

And Lebanon has paid a very heavy price to preserve these values, a heavy price because it costed it souls of its people, its infrastructure, and also, it had a heavy economical prices, especially that a good part of the Lebanese youth were obliged to emigrate.

We have asked for the support of the United Nations on various levels. First of all, on the military level, because a strong army and strong armed forces could defend Lebanon against hostilities of the enemy. Also, it could allow the country to confront terrorism, which poses dangers not only on Lebanon but on humanity as a whole.

The second level is the economic level in order to promote new—more economic growth and social justice, because injustice is sometimes taken as a pretext by terrorists and fundamentalist organizations to recruit people and incite them to terrorism.

We also asked for the political support of the United States, for it to take a political position to support Lebanon and to support a peaceful solution for the Middle East crisis that cannot be done at the detriment of Lebanon and to reject settlement. We insist on the rights of return for Palestinians because as it is stated in the Arab Peace Initiative, we reject any form of settlement since it contradicts our Constitution and our special circumstances. So did the Arab Peace Initiative say as well.

In 2010, and since we have been elected as a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council, we will keep on cooperating and coordinating with the United States on issues related to the world so that we can ensure the—Lebanon's interests and so that we can represent the position of the Arab League and the general interest of all of humanity and reach better solutions.

President Obama. You know what? Actually, hold on. I'm going to take one question. Go ahead.

Situation in the Middle East

Q. Mr. President, did you talk about Hizballah weapons? Because it's my understanding that the Lebanese Government now considers it an internal issue and doesn't want the Security Council to deal with it.

President Obama. We did discuss this. And as President Sleiman said, we discussed the enforcement of 1701. We've made progress on this front, but it's incomplete. President Sleiman emphasized his concerns with respect to Israel. I want to be clear that I emphasized to him our concerns about the extensive arms that are smuggled into Lebanon that potentially serve as a threat to Israel. And it is in the interests, I think, of all parties concerned to make sure that enforcement is exerted with respect to such smuggling as well as to any other issues.

So one of the things that I want to make clear is that President Sleiman and I aren't going to agree on every issue with respect to how Israel, Lebanon, the Palestinians, Syria are interacting. What we do share is a commitment to resolve these issues through dialog and negotiations as opposed to through violence.

And that is consistent with the democratic traditions of Lebanon. That's consistent with what we believe is in the interests of both Lebanon as well as the other countries in the region. And we are going to continue to be promoting those processes that bring parties together, even though there are going to be some strong disagreements with respect to what the terms, for example, of a final peace between Israel and the Palestinians may be. And I'm confident that we can arrive at those—such an agreement as long as all the parties are entering into it in good faith.

Okay. All right, thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:51 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. President Sleiman spoke in Arabic, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter.

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